



WRITTEN BY

WILL THE WISE

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Summary: What happened to Will Byers? What is his mysterious connection to the Upside Down? How exactly did he survive his week there? This is his story. Now on ao3 under the same title.

1. Chapter 1

November 6th, 1983, Hawkins, Indiana, Evening

This story starts in the garage of a house, in the suburbs of a town called Hawkins, Indiana, where four boys were getting ready to go home.

Soon, everything was going to change. Soon, one of them would be lost, and things would change beyond imagining for the entire town. Soon, they would learn more about their world, and other worlds, than they ever wanted to know. But for now, they were just a group of friends, geeky, weird, and not popular by any standards, heading home after playing Dungeons and Dragons.

Dustin and Will were taking the road down towards Mirkwood, even though it gave them both the heebie-jeebies. There was just something about the trees towering up on each side, the darkness within the woods. The branches that reached their frail fingers up, and sliced through the sky. How there were never any people on it, never any houses.

It was late though, almost past their curfew. Taking the shortcut through the woods was the only way to get home on time.

As usual, Dustin took the job of distraction. "Race you to my house! Whoever gets there first gets a comic book."

"Any comic book?" Will asked, looking over with a mischievous spark in his eye.

Dustin nodded, not seeing Will's impish smile in the dark. Will started pedaling faster, tearing away down the road and ahead of Dustin. "Hey! I didn't say start!"

"I'll take your X-Men one-three-four!" Will yelled gleefully, all thoughts of monsters, kidnappers, and ghosts gone.

"Get back here!" Dustin yelled, standing up on his pedals. "Get back here, you son of a bitch!" But Will was already speeding off, past

Dustin's house. Dustin sank back onto his bike, defeated. "Son of a bitch," he said again, quieter, watching Will disappear down the street.

Will, meanwhile, had slowed down too, his fear coming back full force. A mist had settled over the street, and it had been turned eerie orange by the streetlights. Everything was still. Completely silent. There wasn't even a squirrel dashing up a tree, or a car in the distance. Will couldn't hear anything outside of himself, and it only made it easier to imagine something bursting, slithering, tumbling, roaring out of the woods.

He pedalled faster.

He knew that there weren't any actual monsters out there, that he was being stupid, but he was still afraid. So he tried to think about something rational. Or not to think at all. Just bike. Listen to what was around him.

He could hear himself breathing. The squeaking of his bicycle chains. And, was that –

Chirping?

Chittering?

It sounded almost like a bird on a spring's day, but ominous, menacing. Besides, it wasn't spring, or day. It was late fall, and cold, and –

An extraordinarily tall figure was suddenly on the street in front of him, swaying lightly back and forth with each step. Not exactly swaying, though. Swaying was a relaxing word, and there was nothing remotely relaxing about this.

Will swerved his bike off of the road, and into the woods. Something about that creature had been, well. Terrifying described it best. Strange. Inhuman. The arms that reached its knees. Its jerking, rough, shaking steps. The way it was coming directly towards him, like it had a purpose.

Will's bike hit a rock that was jutting sharply out of the ground,

almost before he even saw it. He crashed to the ground, but pushed himself up immediately, moaning, and dashed deeper into the trees. If he could just get through Mirkwood and find his way home, he could find Jonathon, or his mom, and they could help him. Call the police, or something, he didn't know. But they would know something.

After what felt like forever, he reached the road again. He kept running, towards his house – thank god thank god thank god his house, which was right there, on the other side of the road.

He dashed up to the door, not letting himself look back, and, fumbling a little with the doorknob, let himself in. His dog was waiting inside (fur standing up, barking), and, for the first time in he didn't know how long, he didn't greet it. Instead, he just pushed past, and ran to Jonathon's bedroom.

"Jonathon?" He cried. "Mom?" He opened all the doors in the hallway, still calling, but no one answered.

He'd always thought that if something like this happened – if he was afraid, for any reason – he would freeze. He wouldn't know what to do. But somehow, even though there was no one to help him, and there was a monster outside his house, and he knew – he didn't know how, but he knew – that it was coming to kill him, he still kept moving. He turned around and hurried to the window, pushing the blinds aside and looking out.

A figure, rocking side to side with each step, arms reaching its knees, face somehow... wrong, was walking across his yard. Straight towards his house.

Will gasped involuntarily, and crawled off the couch, running for the phone. He yanked it off its base and, with shaking fingers, dialed 911. "Hello?" He pressed it to his ear, feeling somehow shaky and more aware of every limb, every finger, than he'd ever been.

His dog barked.

He stepped out into the hall, phone still held to his ear, and watched the door. There was a shadow on the other side of it. Will told

himself not to be stupid, not to run. The door was locked. Whoever – whatever that was, it couldn't get in.

The latch on the door slid open. Will stared for a moment, shocked, because what could've done that?

But there wasn't time to wonder. Within seconds, he was through the back door, leaving the phone hanging on its cord, still ringing.

The shed. He ran across the backyard, not letting himself look back because that would slow him down and he couldn't couldn't couldn't slow down or maybe it would catch him. Then he was in the shed, grabbing at bullets with unsteady fingers, and loading the shell of his dad's old shotgun. He held it towards the door (still shaking, still unable to believe that this was actually happening, that he actually might be about to die) and stood still, waiting for the creature to come in.

Nothing.

Nothing.

He heard the chittering, faint, but coming from the wrong direction. Coming from behind him.

He felt the hair on the back of his neck rise, as he turned, almost not wanting to, not wanting to see it there, looming over him.

But there it was.

Afterwards, Will wouldn't be able to explain what happened then. He would remember the creature's face opening up like a flower, and he wouldn't be sure, but he would almost remember the light shining blindingly bright.

And he would remember, in his panic, instinctively reaching deep, deep inside of himself. So far inside that he was reaching out, but out somewhere else. Like when you look at your reflection in a spoon, and the farther you get from it, the smaller you look. And then suddenly you're upside down. Like inverting light waves, that get so close together that they start spreading apart.

Will reached so far into himself that he started reaching out. And he grabbed at what he found, and yanked it.

When he opened his eyes, the world had changed. But the monster was still in front of him.

So he ran.

2. Chapter 2

Will was still at home. It was just that home had...changed. It was darker, and colder, and there were vines and tendrils crawling along the walls all around him. Had the monster done something? Was it *Will* that had changed the world like this, when he had reached inside himself? Could he undo it?

This was all that Will let himself wonder before running back into his house, away from the creature.

Its *face*. It had opened up. Like some sort of disgusting plant. Like each fifth was a grotesque, misshapen petal.

Will didn't let himself look around once he left the shed, only at the door back door of his house. He could see that there were millions of white and translucent *somethings* floating through the air (ash? dust?), and that everything was lit with a blue-tinged light. The vines that he had seen in the shed earlier were snaking all over his house, and they almost looked moldy. Dead. Although he knew – he wasn't sure how – that they were alive. He almost felt like they were going to suddenly jump out and attack him, wrap their slimy, rotting fingers around his arms and throat, and trap him. Throttle him.

Then he was pushing the back door open (he noticed that it was covered in some sort of clear, wet membrane) and hurrying into the hall, where he ran into his room and shut the door. He pushed at the lock desperately, but it wouldn't click into place: it was rusted stiff. Instead, he grabbed his desk chair, and, with a little gasp from the effort, lifted it over to the door, and pressed it up against it. A barricade. As soon as the door was secure, he curled up next to it, bringing his knees to his chest, and tried to quiet his breathing. *Could the monster move the chair, the way it unlatched the front door?* He looked up at the door, and looked over to his desk, where he had left some of his books. He cursed himself silently for not thinking of picking one up, so he could throw it, should the monster come through the door. But the sound of the monster's heavy steps, and that awful chittering noise, kept him down, out of sight.

He waited, chest rising and falling rapidly, shaking all over, and

watched the door. Listened as the steps became louder and louder. Waited for the moment when the monster would come crashing through his door, to kill him. He tried to stop himself from thinking about what would happen then, if it would eat him, or take him away for something else. Instead, he just stared hard at the door, hoping hoping hoping that it wouldn't hear him, that it couldn't smell him, that it would continue on and leave him be.

He wondered if it would hurt.

The footsteps got slowly louder, louder (he wondered why it was just walking – it knew he was cornered, it thought it had him caught already) louder, until the very floor shook with each step, until they reached the door to Will's bedroom, and he clenched his fists and squeezed his eyes shut, and then –

They continued.

Past the door, down the hall. Will heard the sound of the door opening and shutting, gently.

About a hundred thoughts raced through his head in that moment. The monster could have left, but that didn't make any sense. Maybe it couldn't get past the barricade after all, which meant it could still be in the living room, waiting for Will to come out.

Which brought Will to the next person who could've opened the door. Or, more specifically, two people. "Jonathan," he whispered. And then, more urgently, "Mom!"

The world was changed, but it was still the same world as before. His brother and mom probably had no idea what was going on – they could have both been at work, when suddenly the world went dark. Or worse, they could have been driving home, when suddenly the street lights flickered away. When suddenly, the fog came, and along with it, those vines, which still terrified him so much.

Maybe his mom, or Jonathan, had run home, like he did. Maybe they had just entered the house, oblivious to the creature hiding in their living room. Jonathan might be able to protect himself, but his mom...

It was hard to stand up, to open the door. But he knew that if Jonathan had been there, he would've gone and protected his mother. He would have died trying to save her.

So Will did it. He unplugged his desk lamp, and carried it, with trembling fingers, to the door, which he stood in front of for a moment. *Jonathan would do it. Jonathan would help her*, he thought, and threw the door open.

"Mom!" He shouted, running down the hallway, into the living room, lamp held out in front of him (a weapon of sorts), ready for the monster to coming roaring out from the shadows.

Silence.

The room was empty.

Will spent the following hours back in his bedroom. At first, he just stayed on his bed, back pressed against the headboard, hugging his knees. He didn't dare move, or make a noise, lest the monster hear him and come back. Instead of sleeping, he watched his door and listened for the sound of a car coming down the road. He didn't know why Jonathan hadn't been home when he got back, although it was probably because he took an extra shift. He knew his mom was working late that night. He wasn't stupid – he knew that the entire town would be in chaos. He had guessed already that there were probably safe houses of some sort being set up, and that his brother and mom would definitely be safer there, but he also knew them. He knew that they wouldn't leave him out here waiting all night, terrified.

So where were they? He knew that there was a chance –

But he *wasn't going to think about it* –

But he had to, because he needed to prepare for the worst –

He couldn't. So he didn't.

For every thought he had about his family, he had three about the monster. What was it? Where did it come from? Where was it now? Why had it come for him, and why didn't it kill him when it had a

chance?

When was it coming back?

After a torturous eternity of staying curled up on his bed, lost in thought, Will finally jerked himself back to the present, and assessed the situation.

He was in his room, that was obvious. The wallpaper was grimy in spots, and peeling in others. The lightbulb in his lamp, which he'd laid on the bed next to him, in case he needed to grab it at a moment's notice, was filthy inside. The glass was almost coated with a black, moist substance, and even the clear spots were yellow with age.

What age, though? His house had obviously been through years of decay, but when had that happened? One moment everything was pristine, and the next, it looked as if it had been crumbling (he guessed, since he didn't know much about time) over a decade. And, of course, the vines. Most of them were about the thickness of his arm, and they snaked over every single surface, inside the house and out. All of them had the same wet, slimy coating as his back door. His bed was unmade, and both the mattress and the sheets had long, jagged tears through them. When he tried to turn on his light, it just clicked hollowly. The window was broken, with only a few jagged pieces of glass still clinging to the frame. The air filled with the same thin, floating flakes that were everywhere outdoors.

Will knew that he should leave his room, see if things were the same outside, but he didn't. Not yet. He would wait until his mother or brother came back. Then he knew he wouldn't be as afraid.

The first thing he did was cover the window. The plaid yellow curtains that had originally hung over his window had rotted away until they were just scraps of fabric, barely clinging to each other. He had to find a replacement. It took a bit of time to do it silently, but he pulled the sheets and quilt off his bed, and tied them together onto the empty curtain rod. Once it was back over the window, he could see almost nothing of the outside.

Which meant that the outside could see nothing of him.

Having secured the window, he started building up his barricade. He couldn't drag anything terribly heavy over – even that desk chair would have been too much. In that initial moment of desperation when he had pulled it in front of the door, the monster had already been outside. It already knew that he was there, so there was no way of alerting it further. Now that it was gone, and that it (probably) didn't know how to find him again, the risk of being discovered was a lot higher. So, instead of pulling any furniture over, he pulled handfuls of books from his shelf.

Almost an hour later, he was back on his bed, curled up again. All the books from his bookshelf, every science fair trophy he'd ever gotten, his textbooks, even his shoes were thrown haphazardly on his desk chair. He'd picked up the desk lamp from the bed, and moved to put it on the pile, but then he'd stopped. It had taken a moment to decide, but he'd eventually decided to put it back on the desk. At least he could keep a smidge of normalcy.

He'd done everything he could to secure the room. Which meant all he could do was stay on the bed, and wait.

Where were they? The only two people he'd always trusted to come when he needed them, every single time. Even Mike, who he was almost closer to than anyone else, could sometimes get too swamped in his own problems to be there for Will. But Jonathan and his mom, had always, always been there. Jonathan had always come to his bedroom and to talk on the nights when their parents were fighting. His mom had always, every time, come to his room when he had a nightmare. Jonathan helped him to accept who he was – on the days when Troy and James had been especially awful, when all he wanted was to tear up his drawings, set them on fire, stop playing Dungeons and Dragons, find some way to be *normal for once*, Jonathan had talked him through it. He'd told him that to be weird was to be cool. That weird was the definition of cool. They'd always been there for him, made sure he wasn't afraid.

So he knew that they must be on their way.

But, until they came, Will had to stay still, careful, in case the monster came back. And he wondered. Were there other alien creatures out there? Did it – the monster – have anything to do with

the transformation of the world?

And, if it did, did that mean that it wasn't Will's fault? Did that mean that he didn't need to fix it?

He didn't answer any of these questions. He couldn't answer any of these questions. He guessed at some answers, and hoped desperately for them to be true. But mainly, he just waited, shaking all over, both from fear and from cold, and wondered. Mainly, he just waited for Jonathan and his mother to come home, and tell him what it was he should do next.

3. Chapter 3

November 2nd, 1983. Early Morning

The monster was chasing Will through Mirkwood, chittering and chirping away. Will sprinted, panting, legs burning from the effort, arms pumping fast. But then his foot caught on one of the roots crisscrossing the ground. Before he knew it, he was crashing to the ground. When he rolled over, the monster was standing over him. But it wasn't the monster. It was –

Then he was in his bed, eyes wide, heart racing, covered in cold sweat. For a moment, he almost believed that things were normal, that he hadn't done this. That the whole thing had been part of a nightmare. That the world hadn't been suddenly torn up, and thrown back together by someone who had the blueprints but didn't *actually know* how everything worked.

Late the night before, he must have taken the makeshift curtains down, because his quilt was wrapped around himself. That and he could feel a frigid breeze blowing through the window. The sun was shining, but the light was dull, like it was shining through clouds.

Was there even a sun anymore? He didn't know. Maybe the light was an illusion. Or maybe it was coming from something else –

'Where the hell are they?'

Was that –

'Jonathan?'

"M-m-mom?" Will called, sitting straight up in his bed.

'Check the couch!'

"Jonathan?" His eyes lit up, and he tumbled off the bed, running towards the door.

'I did!'

"Mom! Jonathan!" They had come back for him. He'd known that they would, and they did, even if it took a few hours, they still came back, and now he wouldn't be alone. He would have someone to help him through this. *They* would be able to help him through this. His mother, and his brother. The two best people in the world. He couldn't quite make out what they were saying, but that didn't matter. They'd come back. "Jonathan!"

'Oh. Got them.'

He burst through the door, feeling like a massive weight had been taken from his shoulders. He ran into the hall. "Mom!"

'Okay, sweetie, I will see you tonight.'

As he ran, he stepped on a slippery, wet spot on the carpet, and he slipped to the ground. Even that couldn't crush his spirit, though. He scrambled up again.

'Yeah, see you later.'

He ran down the hall, ready to see Jonathan and his mom, Jonathan probably bustling around the room, his mom probably stressing out, from the way it sounded. Although she was always stressing out, a little bit. He almost smiled at the thought.

Then, he burst into the kitchen.

And froze.

'Where's Will?'

The room was empty.

He only paused for a moment before realizing that there was still a chance they could be there. Their voices had sounded muffled; maybe they were outside. With a burst of courage, he unlocked the door and ran outside, slipping on the slick ground, looking left and right.

'Oh, I – I didn't get him up yet. He's probably still sleeping.'

"Jonathan!" He whirled around, searching the fog and the rotted trees

around him. Looking down the crumbling road, around the yard.

'Jonathan, you have to make sure he's up.'

"Mom!" There was a thick fog floating in the air; maybe they were a little way's away, and he couldn't see them.

'Mom, I'm making breakfast.'

"Jonathan!" Will yelled, in a strangled voice. They were so close, so close, and they couldn't get to him. They could easily be searching for him, worrying about him.

'I've told you this a thousand times.'

"Mom?" He said, eyes welling up with tears. Where were they? He needed their help. Actually, they didn't even need to help him. He just needed them to be here.

'Will, c'mon honey. It's time to get u-'

Suddenly, just as he started to comprehend what his mother was saying, he realized where he was. Out, in the driveway of his house, with a monster prowling the woods. Yelling. He looked around one last time, gasping in the choked up, watery sort of way. He ran back inside, not caring about the tears falling, because there wasn't anyone around to see them.

'He came home last night, right?'

There wasn't anyone around to see them.

Will locked the front door, even though he knew it was useless against the monster anyway, and hurried to his room. He shut the door, but didn't have the energy to rebuild his broken barricade. Instead, he sunk to the ground, trying to keep his raw, strangled sobs silent enough to hear his family's conversation.

'He's not in his room?'

They were talking about someone. Someone that they couldn't find. Someone that would normally be there, but wasn't.

There were only three people in his family – his mom, Jonathan, and him. They had to be talking about him.

"Mom," He called between gasping sobs. "M-mom? I'm here!"

'Did he come home last night, or not?'

They were still talking. They couldn't hear him. *'Mom! I'm right here! I'm –'*

He made himself stop, because wherever they were, they couldn't find them.

He wasn't sure what that meant. Their conversation sounded normal. Not at all like they were in the same messed up, deteriorated world that he was. It sounded like it was any old day, and Will –

Had gone missing? Was lost? He didn't know. It could be a recording. Did he remember ever getting lost, or staying at a friend's house without permission? He couldn't, but there could easily have been something he'd forgotten. It might've happened a long time ago.

But wait. He was being stupid. Because where would the recording have been playing from? None of the electronics were working, and even if they did, they would flicker on and off, like he was in the middle of a storm. Nothing was playing smoothly and clearly, like that conversation was.

They were still talking, and he couldn't quite make out the words, but they were panicked, nervous. If he was hearing it in real time – he didn't know *how*, but he wasn't thinking about that – then they must be looking for him. Realizing that he's missing.

With that thought, pieces started clicking into place.

During the day, the world outside was bright, in the way that a foggy, cloudy autumn's day is bright. He could see now, through the window, that everything – the trees, the leaves, the ground – was black and rotted, and covered in that clear, sticky membrane. It was still cold, and terrifying, but at least he could see five feet in front of him.

He spent the next hours contemplating his theory. After searching for forever, he finally found a notebook whose pages hadn't completely rotted away, and a pencil that, miraculously, hadn't broken off at the tip. He used the corner of his blanket (normally he'd avoid getting it dirty, but right now it was so rotten already that there wasn't any point) to clear the black, thick layer of *something* from his desk, then sat down.

Will paused for a moment, seated and facing the wall, and then stood up again. He pulled the chair out from under the desk, then pulled the desk away from the wall. He pushed the chair in on the other side, so that he would be facing the bedroom door while working. That was better. Now, nothing was going to sneak in on him.

Once he felt safe, Will sat down and got to work. He drew everything – all the members of his family. His kitchen. Some people in lighter strokes than others. Some talking, some listening. Some invisible to the others. He just kept drawing. If a new idea came into his head, then he drew that in to, as best he can. When he was finished, he threw the original onto the floor, and redrew it. Again and again, until it was perfect. For hours.

He didn't know how many he'd finished. The problem was that he kept realizing something new, figured out another piece of the puzzle. And then he would need to start again, so that he could fit that part in neatly. Now, he had drawings scattered all over the floor, he was exhausted, and his hand hurt. But at least he understood – or thought he understood – what was happening.

He just needed to come up with a plan. And to do that, he needed to scope out the rest of the house.

Before he left the bedroom, he picked up his lamp. He still didn't know where the monster was, or how well it could hide. For all he knew, it was in his living room right now. So, holding the lamp like he would a baseball bat, or a knife, he slowly opened the door. The hallway was empty.

Heart pounding, he crept down the hall and into the kitchen. Everything was normal (or as normal as it could get) until he looked up. Crisscrossing the ceiling were hundreds of Christmas lights. When

he tiptoed back into the hall, they were there too. Lights everywhere. Hanging from the walls, the ceiling. All dark, but still menacing. Eerie. He gripped the lamp harder as he felt his heart speed up.

Who had done this? *Why?*

When he reached the living room, he stopped in his tracks.

A long string of lights were hung, almost methodically, across the wall above the couch. Below each light was a letter. Even though the paint was faded and chipped, he could make out at least half of the alphabet. Where had the letters come from? Who else had been in the house? And why had they hung up Christmas lights, when the electricity wasn't working?

According to his theory, he was alone.

He thought through what he knew. The world around him was just the way it normally was, except that there were no people, except him. And he was starting to understand why that was. But did these lights change things?

Did these lights mean that there might be someone else there? He imagined a faceless someone creeping through his house, hanging up the lights, and tried to ignore his heart hammering in his chest.

He heard wind whistle past his window, and he jumped. Was there a storm coming? Walking cautiously across the room, he looked outside.

The sky was invisible behind a thick curtain of fog, but he could see lighting, forking through the air. Thunder, booming so loud that he felt it. And, he could see, in the clouds –

A shadow?

A huge one, taller than his house twice over, taller than anything he'd ever seen, rising up in the distance. Will stood, frozen, at the window, as he watched it grow. He couldn't tell if it was a creature, or a cloud, or something...*else*. It was just a giant shadow, growing and growing. Huge limbs split off of it, reaching about like the legs of an immense spider. He couldn't see its eyes, only feel them watching

him. Looking deep into him. As if somehow, out of all the acres of forest, the hundreds of homes, it had found his very window, and knew he was there. Something cold gripped him, and he stiffened, eyes widening –

Just like that, the shadow monster turned and left, almost in the rolling way that clouds do. Will felt the grip on him release, and he turned and ran back to his room, each step unsteady, making sure to lock the door. Thoughts racing, he pulled a clipboard off his desk and grabbed his sketchbook. Again, he started to draw. He was still scared. He was still shaking. There were still mysteries to solve, things to learn, facts that he didn't want to be true. And now, bit by bit, he was finding a way to deal with it.

4. The Hive

The child had powers. He might not know it yet, but we do.

The scavenger is a weak creature, but we let it hunt. We let it feed. We know its power, and how it can help us. And when it is lucky enough to catch one of them, it drags it into the nether, and, after eating its fill, brings it to us.

But the child had pulled itself into the nether. The scavenger had followed it through, instead of dragging it behind.

Now, the child watches us from its window. It is weak, and small. It has no idea it is so powerful.

We begin the integration process.

5. Chapter 4

Will was somewhere else. He wasn't sure where, wasn't sure how, but that the only explanation that made sense. His friends would have said that it was just like the Plane of Shadows, in Dungeons and Dragons. He wasn't going to give it any names yet. The only things he knew were that it was somehow decomposed, and that everything had been overrun with black, slimy roots. Everything was in the same place it was normally, just old, and rotted. And his family wasn't here. Nobody was here. Just Will, and whoever had set up those Christmas lights. He could *hear* his family, though. They couldn't hear him. At least, if they did, he didn't hear them react to it. The only things inhabiting the place were the tendrils, the creature that had followed him home, and the shadow monster.

The shadow monster. It was one of the things he couldn't figure out. The humanoid creature was terrifying, but he could at least find an explanation for it. It was just an animal. He didn't know if it was a predator, since it hadn't technically harmed him in any way. But it was a creature. A solid, flesh and blood creature. But he couldn't explain the shadow monster. It had looked like it was made of some sort of gaseous substance. For now, he let himself assume that it was just a cloud that had been blown into that shape by the wind. He needed to find a way to contact his mother, and being in constant fear of some sort of *monster* wasn't going to help with that.

That didn't mean that the thought of that giant, cloudy creature didn't make him shudder.

Around noon, Will heard the voice in the living room start to speak again. He stood up warily, and put his final drawing on his bedside table. If it had been a normal day, he would have swept the drawings on the floor into a careful, neat pile, so that his mom wouldn't have to. It wasn't a normal day. Instead, he again picked the lamp off his desk, and opened the door. As usual, the hallway was empty. The lights hung, and the dull color in them reminded him momentarily of ghosts. He gulped shakily, surprised by how dry his mouth had gone, and how suddenly. He crept into the living room, and sat down on the couch.

Just like before, he could hear his mother and his brother talking, mostly about him. At first it was his mother, in tears, ranting about the chief of police. Then, Jonathan, comforting her. All the while, Will sat in the living room. He had covered all of the windows in the house, , but he still felt shaky from fear. The only thing that comforted him was his family's voices. In order to distract himself, he tried to figure out how much they knew. They both thought he had gotten lost on the way home. Apparently the chief of police thought he had gone to his dad's house.

Will thought of his dad. He had cared about him, Will knew that. It was just that he didn't really know what Will wanted. Will thought of the baseball games they'd gone to. He thought about some of the things he'd heard his dad call him. *Queer. Fag. I just want him to fit in*, he'd said once, to Joyce. Will had been in his room, but he could hear it through the walls. *Maybe if we could try to send him to more baseball lessons. Have him quit drawing. Try and make some new friends.* Will had reminded himself that his dad had been different than he was when he was in school. He'd been one of the jocks. He didn't know that it was still possible to be happy if you weren't popular.

That didn't stop Will from trying to be what his dad wanted him to be, though. He went to the baseball lessons, and the games. He stopped showing his dad his new drawings, or hanging them up on the fridge. He didn't invite his friends over, because his Dad had said they *give me the creeps*. Will knew his friends were weirdos, but he was a weirdo too. Jonathon had said that that was okay. Besides, he loved his friends.

What might things be like if they were with him? He thought of Mike, who had always been the leader. He would already be making plans, trying to figure out how they had gotten there, and trying to find ways to communicate with the normal world. Lucas, he imagined, would be trying to come up with a logical explanation for this, that didn't involve dimensions and monsters. Dustin, who would probably have raided the kitchen. Will smiled at that.

Finally, Will convinced himself to start working. He was still afraid to leave the house, but he could still – what was it that his friends would have done? Mike seemed to be able to solve any problem, so he thought of what he would do. He could try and communicate with

his family, but how? He could hear them talking, even though it sounded muffled and echoey at times. Maybe there was some sort of connection the other way. He briefly considered radio waves, but pushed the thought away. He didn't have electricity, let alone a proper radio. There was no explanation for this, not one that didn't involve monsters or alternate dimensions, so he couldn't follow what Lucas would do.

The next step in his mental list was to find food. He wasn't hungry right now, but he knew he would be later. He stood up warily, and, being careful not to make too much noise, left the living room, and crept down the hall into the kitchen. There were cobwebs stretching across corners of the room. He hesitated for a moment, before opening one of the dark, wooden cabinets bolted to the wall. The insides were caked with some sort of slimy, black, lumpy substance. Will glanced at it, but was surprised that he didn't feel disgusted. If he'd found something like that in his normal kitchen, then he would have gagged. Maybe he was almost used to it by now.

Will had to root through several wet, decayed cardboard boxes before he got to the cans. They were what he'd been looking for – everything else, looking at the state of the house, would have gone moldy long before. He spent some time taking the cans out, looking at the expiration dates, and sorting them into piles on the kitchen table. He'd been doing this for a while before realizing that he didn't really know *what* the date was. So far, he'd been assuming that it was still November 2nd, but who knew? This dimension seemed to be at least years ahead of his. He had no way of knowing exactly when it was *now*. He sat there for a moment, frustrated, and had just decided to start putting them back in the cabinet when he froze.

He heard chittering from outside. It was faint, but getting louder. The creature was on its way to his house. He glanced at the door, then down at the cans of food. Would it be able to tell if things had been moved around since it last came? Would it know, then, that he was in there? Or was it the smell of the food that had brought it there in the first place? He noticed belatedly that it had gotten dark outside. Maybe it only hunted at night.

Will stood up and, pushing the chair out from under the table, started shoving tin cans back into the cabinet. When they were all out of

sight, he pushed the chair back in, and ran into the hallway.

Meanwhile, the chittering was getting louder.

Heart pounding, Will sprinted into his bedroom. *What could be used as a weapon?* He considered running out to the shed and grabbing his dad's old guns, but he couldn't make himself. He didn't like it, but he didn't have the courage to leave his house. Instead, he ran over to his desk and grabbed his lamp. He was starting to doubt that it would do anything against the creature, but he didn't have time to find anything else. He ran back into the hall.

He could hear those heavy, slow footsteps now, along with the chirping. He had a sudden flashback to the night before, when he had been standing in the same place, listening to that same chirping.

The rhythm of the footsteps sounded strange, though. Like it was going at an erratic speed. Or as if there were two of them. As if to prove his point, the second set of footsteps got faster, and louder. Will backed up, and his shaking hand brushed against the telephone.

He stood there waiting for what felt like forever, blood pounding in his ears, lamp held shakily in front of him. He could faintly hear his mother yelling, but he couldn't pay enough attention to get the exact words.

There. He could hear harried breathing on the other side of the door. He could almost make out a shape through the window. He cursed himself silently for forgetting, of all things, to latch the door shut. He knew now that it didn't make a difference, but it would have made him feel safer. He backed up until he was pressed against the wall, not letting himself blink –

A man burst through the front door. When he saw Will, he stopped in his tracks.

"Shit."

6. Chapter 5

A/N: Sorry I missed a chapter last week! This one is longer to make up for it. Hope you like it!

November 6th, 1983. Evening

"Don't you have work tomorrow?" Henry asked, checking his watch. The sun was setting, and the woods were starting to darken.

"Actually," Dale said, with one of his rare smiles, "I've decided to quit my job and join the traveling circus. Or start a business. I thought I told you."

"Start a business?"

"I haven't thought of a name, yet. Something catchy."

"Traditionalists and Torture. Torturing traditionalists. Traditionalists of torture" Henry adjusted his bag, and checked his watch again. The sun was setting rapidly. If they didn't head home soon, they might end up walking through the woods in the dark.

"That's an unusual combination." Dale put a hand on the back of his neck absentmindedly. "We'll protest at pride parades and take lollipops from children."

Henry laughed. "I'll join you."

There was a pause, and then Dale asked, "When is your wife back from her trip?"

"Thursday. She called me last night. She said California is great, but too warm."

Dale would have given a lot for some warmth. The days lately had been cold and wet. "I think I'll take the day off work tomorrow and go to Indianapolis."

"Don't you ever get in trouble for that?" Henry smiled a little, but Dale could tell he was concerned.

"Come on, they don't care. My 'condition,' remember?" Dale said.

Henry didn't say anything, and Dale was grateful for that. "We really should be getting back." Henry checked his watch again.

Dale thought of opening the door to his dark, empty house. Going to sleep with only the company of his thoughts. He glanced at Henry. He didn't want to go home. He didn't know how to say it, though, without sounding like an idiot.

He was saved by the sound of the leaves rustling. "That wasn't fifty yards away," Henry said quietly, cocking his gun.

Dale grinned. *Maybe it's a deer*, he thought. They hadn't caught more than a rabbit all day, and he knew Henry would be willing to stay and try for something more. He hoped it would keep them chasing for a while.

They crept together in the direction of the noise. They couldn't hear anything, or see anything in the trees. It was getting close to night, and visibility was low. Still, the animal had been close, and they would have heard it run away. It didn't make sense that they couldn't see it now.

They heard a twig snap, and a blurry shape shot through the trees. From its size and color, he thought it could be a bear on its hind legs, or a moose if they were lucky. *Bears almost never run on their hind legs*, he thought, but he ignored the warning bells. If he said anything about it, the animal would hear and run away. Dale heard a chittering noise from the direction of the creature, and Henry glanced at him, confused. Dale just continued on. There was no reason to be confused, or concerned. It was probably a bird, nesting in a tree near the animal.

He stood still, keeping his eye and his sight on the spot where the animal had vanished. He heard the chittering noise from behind him, and risked a glance over his shoulder. He saw the same dark, blurry shape rush down through the trees to his right. He turned and aimed his gun in that direction. He was having trouble holding the shotgun up with his bag on his shoulder, though, so he slowly lowered his gun and placed the bag on the floor. Inside it was the rabbit carcass. He

could see a blood stain blooming at the bottom of the bag from its wound.

As quickly as he could, he stood up again, cocking his gun. The chittering was nearer now, and he wondered what sort of bird it might be from. He'd been hunting in these woods for over a decade, and he hadn't ever heard any noise like that. The leaves were rustling, but softly, not like something was pushing at them. The woods had gone almost eerily silent, except for that damn chittering. It was almost dark. He risked another glance at Henry, who was staring, eyes wide, at a spot behind Dale.

Dale turned around slowly, keeping his gun aloft, watching the trees. In the spot that Henry was facing was a bear, standing on its hind legs. It was standing in a clump of trees, so it was a little hard to see, but Dale could tell it probably hadn't eaten in weeks. Its arms and legs were sinewy and thin, and he could almost see its ribs through the leaves.

"Jesus," Henry breathed, looking it up and down.

Dale glanced at Henry, and, with a sigh, said, "I'm not sure I can shoot it." He looked at the bear. It wasn't running from their voices. It wasn't attacking them either. Bears didn't normally eat humans, but it looked hungry enough to go out of its comfort zone. It was probably scared, as well, which made it all the more dangerous. If they backed up slowly, it might not attack them. "If we back up –"

The bear (which he suddenly was sure *wasn't a bear*) flicked its wrists so that its palms faced Henry and Dale, and then triangular folds of skin flapped out around its head, like a frilled lizard in danger. It hissed loudly.

Dale heard Henry gasp, and it was a struggle not to do the same. Instead, he backed up slowly, until he was next to his friend. Henry glanced at him. "Is it some sort of mutant?" he whispered furiously. Dale shrugged, keeping his eyes on the creature.

It stepped out of the shadows, and Dale gulped. The creature was at least eight feet tall, and its body was much more humanoid than he had originally guessed. Its skin was furless, grey, and smooth. The

frills around its head were lined with pink flesh, and had rows and rows of teeth on them. In the middle of the frills was a gaping hole. Its fingers were long, thin, and spindly, unlike anything they had ever seen. Dale stumbled backwards, and Henry had to put a firm hand on his back to steady him. He tried to keep the creature in his sight, but his hands were shaking badly.

It stepped towards them, and Henry roared, "*Run!*"

They both turned and ran, holding their shotguns tightly. "What the hell?" Dale shouted, jumping over roots and rocks.

"Maybe it came from the lab!"

Dale had heard countless stories about Hawkins Lab. *I think they're trying to talk to aliens. I've heard they're on a private mission, building missiles to send to Russia.* He wanted to remind Dale that those stories were a bunch of crap, but he'd just seen a literal lizard man. Instead of answering, he just kept running. He had a stitch in his side, but he tried to ignore it as he ducked through the trees. They could hear loud, heavy steps behind them, as well as that godawful chittering. *The chittering was coming from the creature.*

"Dale, *stop!*" Henry yelled from behind him.

"What the *hell?*" Dale answered, but he skidded to a stop. Henry caught up, and they both turned and faced the creature, which was less than ten yards away from them.

"I'll explain," Henry said, gasping from exhaustion, "later."

Dale didn't think about whether or not there would be a later. He could see the monster more clearly now. Its skin was stretched tight over its bones, which explained why he'd thought it was a starved bear. There were thin strands of something hanging from its frills. Dale couldn't tell if they were made of spit or something else. In a flash, he had his gun up and was shooting desperately at the creature. Henry was doing the same. Every bullet found its target, but none of them were breaking the animal's skin. Instead of cowering or running away, the animal released a shiver-inducing, rasping roar, and spread its hands. "*What the hell?*" Dale bellowed again, but this time he

wasn't angry. He was just terrified. He started to back up, but Henry grabbed his hand before he could.

"We're almost at the edge of the woods," Henry yelled, not taking his eyes off of the animal. "There are kids in those houses behind us. We can't –" Henry didn't finish his sentence. Instead, he yelled, "*Left!*"

The animal leaped forward just as they turned and ducked into the trees to their left. It landed on the ground in a crouch behind them, and roared again. Dale could hear it stand up and follow them. They pressed through the trees, ducking under branches and pushing aside the cobwebs hanging from the leaves. Dale glanced back once, and saw Henry following him, panic written all over his face. Dale thought of happy, confident Henry, and felt a spike of anger. He ignored it. He ran on until they reached a small clearing, and heard a yell from behind him.

He spun around to see Henry on his back, the monster towering over him. He dashed over, not thinking about it, and brought the butt of his gun down over the animal's head. It stumbled backwards, frills fluttering. "*Get back, you son of a bitch!*" He roared, holding the gun up threateningly. The creature hissed at them, and lunged at Dale. He turned to run, and felt it grab his shoulder.

His stomach dropped. (*What was that?*)

He turned and hit the monster in the stomach, then stumbled back, feeling suddenly light-headed. Henry had scrambled to his feet as well, but Dale could see him swaying slightly on his feet. The monster lunged and knocked Henry to the ground. Dale raised his gun to hit it again, but the creature turned and hit the gun out of his hands. It landed on the ground, just on the other side of the clearing. The monster reached down and grabbed Henry's shirt, yanking him roughly off of the ground. Dale lunged for his gun. He saw his hand close around it, and he heard Henry's cut off yell. He picked the gun up and ran for the monster.

Then his dizziness spiked, the ground lurched up to meet him. From the ground, he saw the monster put Henry down and look at him. He opened his mouth to say something, and everything went black.

When he woke up, Henry was gone. And the world was completely different than it had been that afternoon.

Dale spent the next night searching the woods. He'd suspected at first that there had been a sort of freak storm while he was sleeping, and that it had left behind a cold, thick fog. He hadn't given it much more thought.

For what felt like an eternity he wandered the woods, yelling hoarsely for Henry. He didn't know what he would do if he did find him: would the monster be there? Would he have to fight it off? Or would Henry already be dead and gone? Eventually, he realized that he couldn't just keep telling himself to *look a little longer*, or that *I haven't covered the whole woods yet, has he?* Defeated, he'd trekked out of the woods and started knocking on doors.

His plan had been to borrow a phone to call the police about Henry's disappearance. There was a chance that someone else – a hiker, hunter, or one of the kids that were always wandering the woods – had seen the monster, or where it had taken Henry. If no one had, then the police could at least send out a search party.

Whenever he found himself thinking about Henry, or imagining his body, he just clenched his fist and pushed the thought away. He couldn't afford to get sentimental, not right now. He just needed to think about what it was he could do.

Dale wasn't fazed when he found the first house empty. He wavered when the second house was too. On the third one, he started to worry. On the fourth one, he gathered up his nerve and turned the doorknob. The door swung open.

He'd expected a quiet, sleeping home. What he got was peeling paint, flickering lights, and rot. It looked as if it'd been at least months since anyone had lived there. When he'd dialed a number on their phone and put it to his ear, he heard nothing. It was the same in the next house. And the next. And all of them on that street.

How long had he been unconscious? What had happened while he'd been out?

He'd spent the rest of the day searching through the houses in that neighborhood, and the next. He didn't think hard about what might be going on, because he was scared that if he did, he might break down and cry. He'd just checked each house for people, then tried their telephone. Some part of him was strangely desperate for contact. Some part of him was panicking, because he was alone. The other part had told it to shut up and focus. He continued searching, continued to tell himself he wasn't looking for other people.

Eventually, he'd stopped checking every house he passed, and just started wandering.

Is this some sort of hallucination? Am I dreaming?

He passed the ruins of park. The library. The elementary school. He looked at them all and thought of what they'd looked like just the day before. He didn't let himself cry.

It was later, although he didn't know how much, when he heard the footsteps. He'd jumped, then raised his gun.

The footsteps were heavy and loud, and hard, panting breaths followed them.

And that *goddamned chittering*.

The creature was just out of sight.

He'd crept around the corner, cautious. The creature was walking away from him.

He'd followed it until the creature had noticed him, and then ran until the creature slowed down, in front of a house. He'd been in the suburbs, where the houses were sparse and usually big. This one was an exception. It was one story high, and sat on a small hill off the road in front of him. The creature had stopped at the end of the driveway. It seemed to be watching, or listening, and calculating something.

Could he hear a voice?

'Will?'

Was someone in there?

'Will!'

He'd paused, giving the monster one glance, and then dashed to the door. He'd fumbled for a moment with the doorknob, then burst inside.

And there was the kid.

"Shit."

7. Chapter 6

"*Shit*," the man said. He was standing in the doorway, frozen. Will was still backed up against the wall, shaking. He could hear the sound of the monster's footsteps on the street outside, but they were almost drowned out by the roar of his thoughts. Who was this man? Why was he here? If he was here, then was it possible Will's family was, too? "*Shit*," the man said again.

And then he was unfrozen and running towards Will. Will ducked into the hall and dashed towards his room. He didn't know if the man was there to help him or to hurt him, but instinct told him it was the latter. He hurried inside and moved to shut the door, but as soon as he started to push at it, he felt something heavy land against the other side, hard. He pushed the door desperately for a moment, but it wasn't enough. The man broke inside, slamming the door behind him. He brushed past Will and across the room, muttering something. As he got closer, Will realized that he was just repeating one word. Weapons. Was he...sane? The man walked up to Will, who pressed his back up against the door. He grabbed him by the shoulders.

"How long have you been here? How long has the world been like this?" Will felt weak from fear. "How long?" He gripped Will's shoulders tighter.

"A d-day," Will stammered, looking up at him.

"Same as me," the man said quietly, glancing at the door. "That's no help." He looked back at Will. "Have you ever fought it off?"

Will knew he was talking about the monster outside. "I – I don't know," Will said, pointing at his desk. "I used the lamp. It didn't, um, I didn't fight it, though."

"Then what did you do with it?" The man sounded exasperated.

"It didn't actually come in, but that's what I've been using to..." Will trailed off, not really knowing how to end that sentence.

"A lamp's not gonna do anything," the man said, biting his lip and

looking around the room. "You got a baseball bat or something?"

Will shook his head. Now that the immediate shock of seeing the man had faded, he could hear the monster's footsteps clearly. From what he could tell, it was just outside his house. They needed to find something quickly or it would reach them.

"Fire!" The man exclaimed, turning back to Will. "Do you have any waterproof matches?" When Will didn't answer, he continued. "Did you ever go camping? Anything?" Will shook his head, but stopped himself.

"My dad! I-I think he took me camping... with Jonathon, when I was little. B-but the supplies were put in the shed after we came back." The trip had been a disaster. Jonathan had gotten a high fever, and Will had fallen and scraped up his knee. He'd cried for hours, and nothing his dad could do consoled him.

Will listened to the sound of the monster's footsteps for a moment. It sounded like it was still outside the front door. What was it doing? He thought of the night before, when the monster had entered his house, just to leave and disappear. There were many things he still didn't know about it, and he wondered if he could have been using those things to his advantage.

"Where's the shed?"

"In th-the backyard." Will pointed in that general direction (noticing, just for a moment, that his hand was shaking.)

Without even hesitating for a moment, the man opened the door and dashed out into the hallway. Will heard the front door open just as he stepped to follow him, and he whirled around. The monster stepped over the threshold. "Quickly!" Will yelled, running down the hall, through the kitchen and out into the yard. The man, who had reached the shed, didn't turn. Will heard roaring and the sound of toppling furniture as the monster crashed its way through the house, and he ran faster.

The man flung the door of the shed open and rushed inside. Will followed just a few steps behind him. "Matches, matches, matches –"

The man hurried over to one of the chests of drawers pushed up against the wall, and started rooting through it. Before Will could follow suit, he realized something. There was nothing to light. Even if they did find the matches, there was no way that they could fight off the monster. They would need at least some sort of stick, or torch to light and use as a weapon, and all of the flammable objects in the shed were thick with slime. This plan wasn't going to work. As if the man had read his mind, he stopped searching for matches and said "Kid." Will looked up at him. "Out."

"What?"

"Out. Out of the shed. We need to do something different." The man grabbed a baseball bat that was lying on the ground, and tossed it to Will. He grabbed Will's dad's shotgun, which Will had dropped to the floor the night before, and jerked his chin in the direction of the door.

Will felt a little jolt thinking of that first night. Just a day before, he'd been going home, expecting to be welcomed home by his family. Expecting to go to school the next day and see his friends. Dreading going to school. Now (this brought a lump to his throat) he would have given anything to be at school. Taking notes. Taking quizzes. Anything normal.

Will was jerked out of his thoughts by the man, who grabbed him by the shoulders and shoved him outside. At the same time, the back door of the house crashed open and the monster stumbled down the stairs and onto the yard. It landed on the ground in a crouch and looked up, roaring. As it did, its face opened up, like it had that first day. It made Will want to turn around and hide, but he couldn't, because the man was pushing him in front of the shed door. "Move, move, move!" The man said. Then, "Hold the doorknob."

"What?" Will grabbed the doorknob anyway, but he couldn't figure out what it was the man was trying to do. He was having trouble thinking hard about anything, with the monster hissing and prowling towards them. "What are you doing?"

The man stood in front of Will, holding the gun up, as if he was ready to hit the creature at any moment. "Wait."

"It's coming toward us!"

"Yeah, thanks for pointing out the obvious. Trust me!" The monster was mere feet away from them. "When it lunges, open the door."

"What!?"

"Just do it!" The man stood there for a moment longer, and then, just as the monster leapt up and toward him, jumped to the side. Will, finally understanding, yanked on the doorknob. The monster, carried by its momentum, stumbled through the shed door. It crouched and turned, already leaping towards the door, but Will slammed the door shut, and threw his weight up against it. He felt something heavy slam into him, and he fought to keep himself steady. "Help!"

The man ran over and leaned over Will in order to push against the door himself. The monster leapt against it again, and Will thought he felt the very ground shake. He pressed himself up against the door, pushing it with all of his might. He heard the monster jump, the walls shook, and boom! the door splintered. Will and the man were thrown back, onto the ground. "Shit!" the man yelled as he and Will scrambled to their feet. The monster was out of the shed, and the door had come clean off. The front wall had splintered away, and was lying in a dusty pile on the ground.

The monster roared at them, angry. Will stumbled backwards, right into the man. "What do we – what do we do?"

"What, you expect me to have a plan?"

They backed up until the man was standing pressed up against the wall, with Will just a few feet in front of him, holding the baseball tightly but fearfully. He thought of the baseball classes his dad had always dragged him to and wished that he'd worked harder in them.

The monster lunged toward him, and he tried to bring down the bat on it. Instead, the force of the monster's weight made his hands fumble, and the bat bounced harmlessly on the ground. He was knocked down by the creature, which now crouched over him, growling and drooling. Will glanced up, and he saw three things at once. The man was standing over the monster, pulling the shotgun up

to hit it. The monster's terrible, flower-like face was hovering over him, shaking and snarling. And behind it, a shadow was growing and blossoming across the sky.

Will gasped. The rolling, cloud-like shadows were tumbling across the sky above the trees, but not in the way clouds did. It was the shadow monster that Will had seen before. The creature on top of him must have been able to sense it somehow, and it turned to look at it as well. Just then, the man brought the shotgun down on the creature's back, and it shied away from Will, its petal-like face closing up as if in fear. Will scrambled to his feet and grabbed the baseball bat. He felt a roaring in his head as if the wind was suddenly blowing strongly. The sound seemed to be coming from the shadows, which reached out from the trees and wound their way through the air, like each one was a separate limb of some huge creature. The air was full of them. Will stood frozen, unable to think of anything other than that rushing, roaring noise, and the shadows that were winding everywhere, everywhere –

"Kid." The man had grabbed his sleeve and was pulling him towards the door. "Inside. Now."

The shadows had disappeared, along with the monster. The yard and woods were still, and silent as a grave. Will glanced around, shocked and rattled, before the man yanked on his sleeve one more time, and Will followed him up the stairs and into the house.

8. Chapter 7

Immediately after they stepped inside, the kid slumped to the ground, and sat there with his back against the wall. He didn't say anything. Dale stood in the doorway for a moment, unsure what to do. How to deal with all of his emotions, while still making sure this kid was okay. How to deal, period. Eventually, he pulled out a chair and sat down. He told himself that it – him sitting down, finally admitting defeat - was because the kid was probably in shock, and that might need a moment to process what had happened, which was mostly true. What he was ignoring was the sudden wave of dizziness that had overtaken him. His stomach, too, felt as if it was being stabbed from the inside out. "God," he muttered, clutching it. How had he not noticed his until now? "Kid," he said, and the kid jumped a little, as if he had forgotten Dale was there.

"My name is Will," The kid – *Will* - said, but not unhappily. Not happily either, of course, but definitely not angry, or upset.

Dale, for a reason even he couldn't name, ignored the kid. "Do you have anything to eat?"

"No... I haven't been able to find anything that's not moldy." The kid sounded ashamed, and Dale had a sudden flashback to another kid, years and years ago, who'd felt responsible for more than he should have as well. Dale pushed the thought away and focused on Will, in front of him. What could he say? That it wasn't his fault? That none of this bloody awful, stupid shit was his fault? That it was awful that a kid Will's age was in a situation like this?

He wished he'd spent more time with kids lately. "Ah..." he said awkwardly.

"Have you seen it before?" Will said, after another pause.

"What?" Dale asked.

"The monster – have you seen it before?"

"Yeah. Once – just before I passed out. Just before this," Dale waved

his hand vaguely around the house, "freak storm or whatever."

"Freak storm? I thought –" Will cut himself off. "Never mind."

"What?"

"I, um –" Will seemed to change his mind about something. Dale considered pointing it out, but decided not to. "Did you see them disappear? The monsters."

"Monsters?" He looked sharply at Will. "What do you mean?"

"There was a shadow... thing. Didn't you see it?"

"Just a shadow?" Maybe the kid was hallucinating after all.

"I was...probably imagining it." Dale didn't press him. The kid was freaking out, and besides. It's easy to see things, especially when you're young and afraid. The kid *had* probably just imagined it. He thought for a few moments longer, and then stood up roughly. He was antsy.

This was ridiculous. One minute he's dizzy, and then hungry, and then he just feels *awkward*. Now, he was antsy. He was acting like a kid. Actually, looking at the kid in front of him, he was *worse* than one. At least Will was keeping it together. He wasn't dizzy, light-headed, jolting from one emotion to the next. What was wrong with Dale?

He paced over to the window, then back to the door. He needed to avoid these spirals. He needed to do something. "Will," he said.

Will stood up, and Dale couldn't quite tell if he was reluctant or not. "Yeah?" Will looked up innocently at him, and Dale felt a sudden little stab of anger, because he didn't deserve this, the kid didn't deserve this, *Henry* didn't deserve it, and goddammit he was spiraling again, and he needed to speak. Do something. "You said that you'd seen the monster before. The – the humanoid sorta one." He gestured (uselessly.)

"It came last night, when I first came here."

Dale filed the thought away for later. "We need some sort of defense." He walked over to the window, fingered the curtains, and then spun back around. "You saw it. Can it see? Smell? Hear? Does it have a stronger sense of taste than normal? How could it have found us?"

"I-I don't know...I guess it can't hear, or see. Since we can't see its eyes."

"We just have to block up the house from everything, then." Dale looked around, and rushed over to the back door. He closed the blinds over its window, then stepped over to the sink. There was another window over that. He flung the curtains over it. He turned, and Will was still standing by the kitchen table, looking nervous. "Well, I can't finish it all myself." Will started and started pulling the curtains over the windows as well.

When Will reached his mom's bedroom, he reached for the curtains, but then froze. The fabric had rotted away, so that the tattered remnants just barely clung together. Will paused, and remembered his bedroom. He pulled the quilt from his mom's bed and pulled it off roughly. He pulled a chair over and stood on it, tying the quilt to the curtain rod. The blanket shut off the meager, dim light that was in the room, leaving it in darkness. That was better than being in sight of the monster, though.

Together, Dale and Will traveled from room to room, tying fabric together, and, eventually, covering up every window in the house. Every once in a while, Dale saw Will glance (nervously?) at him out of the corner of his eye. He resisted the urge to glance back.

Dale was still shocked and confused. Shocked from the loss of his best friend, and from the loss of almost everyone in Hawkins. Confused because *what on earth had happened?* Where had the people gone? And when? He knew that he rightfully shouldn't have been unconscious for more than a few minutes, but clearly he had been. So how long exactly? And how had Will been in this new, mutated version of the world exactly as long as he had?

He didn't let himself think about it. Instead, he immersed himself in the work. Tried to cover every inch of every piece of glass, with the kid hurrying around behind him.

As they finished though, he couldn't help but notice some other things. Things that were definitely wrong. Even here, even in this place. Like the Christmas lights, crisscrossing the walls and the ceiling. The wall at the back of the living room, where the lights had been strung all the way from one wall to the other. Where the alphabet had been written between the lights, in large, harried, haunting letters. Other things, too. The half circle of lamps sitting around the base of the bed in the master bedroom. It seemed like something huge had happened, and that only the ghostly remnants were left. Where were the people who had set up these things? What had they been thinking when they created them? Had they been fighting for their lives? Had they been trying to find some way to reverse whatever had obviously happened that changed the world like this?

"Will," he said, snapping himself out of it. Thinking was bad. Thinking always tipped him into the whirlpool. Into a downward spiral, whose bottom he'd reached before. Only once, and that was enough to never want to again. He could usually stop himself from drifting off into his thoughts, but right now, his self-control was ebbing. It was probably the hunger, eating away at him from the inside. "Do you have a watch?"

"Um, yeah." Will glanced at it. "It's eleven fifteen."

"When's your normal," he hesitated, "bedtime?"

"Like, ten," Will said, almost like it was a question. "I'm not tired, though."

"Okay," Dale said, sitting down heavily on the couch. "Okay." He *was* tired, and he hadn't realized it. Just like the hunger and the dizziness. He hadn't realized it until it crashed over him like a tidal wave. His eyelids were heavy, and he felt the irresistible urge to lean over and let himself sink into sleep right there, on the couch. He and Will both opened their mouths to speak at the same time. "Is it okay –"

"If you want to sleep, that's –" Will paused, and waited a moment for Dale to keep on speaking.

"Is it – no. How long since you last slept?"

"Since this morning."

"Is it all right if I just take a quick catnap? Only for an hour, and then you wake me up."

"Yeah. Of course. Do you...do you want a blanket? You can, um, sleep in my parent's room."

"Yeah. Thanks." Dale didn't have the energy to form any more words. Instead, he stumbled straight down the hall and into the master bedroom. He used the last of his energy to pull a tattered quilt messily over himself, and then he fell into a deep sleep.

Dale jerked awake roughly, faded light not streaming through the window, but sort of sluggishly sitting in the air. It was morning.

The kid was supposed to wake him up.

Why hadn't he woken him up?

Dale threw off the covers, barely noticing the cold bite of the air. Had something happened while he was asleep? What, and how had it not woken him up? He didn't dare call for Will – they still didn't know how it was the monster tracked them, and it could easily be through noise – which meant that he had to search for him. He hurried out into the hallway and down towards the kitchen, checking every room along the way. When he reached the living room, he stopped.

Will was sitting on the couch, staring up at him. He'd pushed something behind the cushions just as Dale had come in. Dale decided not to ask him about it. Let the kid do whatever he wanted. As soon as they had found some other survivors, maybe set up a normal life again, he wouldn't have to take care of Will anymore. They would go their separate ways.

"Why didn't you wake me up?"

"I wasn't tired."

Dale opened his mouth, but didn't know how to respond. Instead he sat down on one of the armchairs facing the sofa. "What happened? To the world? To the people?" His voice came out broken. He was

shocked to feel tears welling up. He pushed them away.

"I..." Will said, and trailed off. When he spoke again, his voice was smaller. "I don't know."

"Well, someone's gotta know." Dale sat back and looked at the ceiling, rubbing his face with his hands. "Have you seen anything? Signs of people? Clues?"

"Well."

"Jesus, kid." Dale kicked himself for being exasperated. He missed Henry, he was tired, and he was hungrier than he'd ever been, but he couldn't blame it on this kid. He spoke again, this time slightly softer. "You saw something?"

"I heard my mom. And my brother."

"Where? Were they here? Or did you hear them somewhere else? Did you see them?"

"N-no, I just... I just heard them talking. But it was like they were echoes. Coming from somewhere else." Dale opened his mouth, but Will kept talking. "I thought at first – I ran outside to see if they were there, but I couldn't see them."

"Just their voices? Was it a recording?"

"The electricity isn't working. I thought –"

"Yeah?"

"Wait a second." Will stood up and left the room. He returned a moment later with a piece of paper. He handed it to Dale, who stood up and held it up to the covered window, so that he could get some small bit of muffled light on it.

"Jesus," he breathed. The paper had an intricate drawing on it, interrupted here and there by tiny words. "Is that you?" He tapped his finger on one of the people in the drawing. He was wearing a vest and a plaid shirt, just like the kid standing behind Dale.

"Yeah."

"So this means..." Will watched him silently. "I've got to...I've got to go."

"I mean, I don't know if its true. I just threw it together in an hour, and its probably all wrong –"

"I'm not worrying about that, kid." Dale stepped into the hallway, and started walking toward the back door. "I'm not afraid that your – your *delusions* are true. But we need food."

The kitchen door slammed, and Will was left standing in the living room, alone.

9. Chapter 8 - The Hive

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" There was a power in the creatures. It had reached through – torn a rift through the worlds, opened a chasm in the universe – and shaken our world./span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" On that night, the night when everything changed, we found that something had changed within us. A doorway had opened. A new talent had been released./span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" The scavenger could tear rifts through the worlds. It did, and with its new power, it hunted. It prowled the woods of the new world, and we saw through its eyes how warped it, this other world, was. The light. The leaves. And the child, whose powers were beyond anything we'd ever seen./span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" Something new had come, something more powerful than we would ever be. Something that we could use. Something from beyond the horizon. We wanted it./span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" We waited one night, and then began the integration./

span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US"The boy was part of us. We sustained it. Helped it to survive. The scavenger was ordered away from it, so that it would stay safe. We were making it into a monster, but keeping it safe. Safe, always. Ready for us./span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US" /span/em/p

p class="MsoNormal" style="margin: 0cm 0cm 0.0001pt; color: #222222; font-size: 12pt; font-family: Calibri, sans-serif;"emspan lang="EN-US"Ready for us./span/em/p

10. Chapter 9

Will froze and stood in the doorway for a moment, watching Dale hurry across the yard.

"What was it?" Dale asked suddenly, turning and glaring at Will as he stood in the doorway.

Will hesitated, hesitant to speak out in the open. "The monster," he called, as softly as he could without being inaudible.

"I know what the monster looks like, and that's not what you'd put in that drawing."

"No – the monster. It'll hear us if we're outside."

Dale bit his lip, glanced around, sighed and marched over toward the house. "*What was that thing in your drawing?*"

"It...was nothing," Will whispered, itching to turn and head inside. What if the monster heard them? "Just nothing." He didn't want to cause a fuss over the shadow monster, especially since he wasn't even sure it was real. He'd always had an overactive imagination. When he was a kid, he'd always thought that there were monsters in the woods. Elves, too. He could've sworn he'd actually seen them. Now, he knew that it had just been his imagination, and who said that the shadow monster wasn't the same? "It was nothing. But -"

"But *what?*"

"But won't the monster come? Can't it see you out there? What if it... hears us? O-or sees us, and then we won't be able to fight it off, because we've got no weapons -"

"I –" Dale sighed, looking reluctant to change the subject. "I spent a whole day out here, kid, all of yesterday, and the monster didn't come for me until it was nighttime. I'm fine. What was in that drawing?" His voice was harsher now.

"I told you, it was nothing."

"You wouldn't have put it in the drawing if it was *nothing*."

"I – it was another drawing. I – I couldn't find any spare paper, so I drew over that." Will shrugged awkwardly and looked down.

Dale opened his mouth and then shut it. He tried again. "Okay," he said, like he was choosing his words very carefully. He climbed up the stairs and into the kitchen, and look straight at Will. "Okay, kid. I need to be able to trust that you're telling the truth."

"Yeah, I – I am."

"...because if there is any threat out there, we gotta be able to defend ourselves against it."

"I'll tell you if I see anything."

"And you need to understand that this is serious. More serious than you know. You might think that it's fine, we can fix it, but no. That thing tried to kill us. If something worse had come, we would be dead." Dale's eyes were hard as he said it.

"I understand."

"You're sure."

"Yes."

"Then I'm gonna go." Dale turned, paused, and glanced back. Will was still standing in the doorway, backpack dangling from his hand. "You don't have to come."

"Okay."

"Stay. Draw your pictures, or whatever. Search the kitchen one more time."

"Okay."

The man left the room, and Will walked back inside. He sat down on a chair and made himself suppress the shudder at the thick, slimy substance coating it. As he did, he felt himself relax. He would've

been relieved if he hadn't reminded himself that he was still in danger. That they were still in some other...dimension? World? Realm? And that he couldn't contact his mom or Jonathan.

Oh god, his mom. He could imagine how scared she was. She'd always been high strung, and anything could put her on edge. Missing car keys, like yesterday morning. Being late, although that happened pretty often. Losing things. Having things come up at the last minute – Jonathan needing a new backpack for school the *next day*, or Will having a school event that he'd forgotten about until the hour before. Now, Will had no idea how this would be affecting her. Would she have called the police? Would they think he had been kidnapped? Murdered? Or did she think he was just lost? And how would Jonathan have reacted? Knowing Jonathan, he was pretending not to be worried. Or not pretending, just keeping it low, so that he could help their mom.

Will felt tears well up, and he didn't push them away. That was his family. They were both warriors, protectors, in their own ways. His mother, who would do whatever necessary to keep him and Jonathan safe. And Jonathan, who would help her stay sane, rational, while fighting all of his battles by himself.

Will started to sob, quietly, shakily, as he thought about his family. If only he could talk to them, somehow, in *some way*, just to warn them that he was here. That he was safe, at least for now. If only they could talk to him. Tell him what it was he should do, because he didn't know. He didn't know if he should trust Dale, and if it had been a mistake to show him the drawing. If he was gone now, thinking that Will was crazy and escaping while he could. He didn't know if he could trust himself, even. He felt that he was right. He knew it, somehow. That he was somewhere else, somewhere the same but not quite. Somewhere on the same timeline, and almost the same physically, but without the people. Somewhere that was connected to the normal world. How else could he explain the voices? They were constant, and ranged from worry to full-on panic. He'd stayed up the night before, while Dale was asleep, listening to them. He'd heard insane things. Things that made him furious.

Mom, it could have just been a prank. A-a lot of people have heard about Will, and how he's missing. It was probably just some idiot trying to scare

you.

No, Jonathan. I told you – I know his breathing. I know my son's breathing! I know what he sounds like.

Mom –

He called me, Jonathan. He might have been trying to say something –

Mom –

He might have been trying to –

Mom! I'm sorry, but I think –

You think I'm crazy. Y-you think that I just made it up, that I just –

No, mom! I don't think you're crazy. I just think – I just think that you're really scared and that maybe - maybe you need to rest.

I – okay. Okay.

Okay?

Okay.

Let's go. You can...rest, and then we'll – we'll talk about it in the morning, okay?

Okay.

Their voices had been echo-y and had faded away then. Will assumed that they – if they really were his family, and if they really were in the real world – had gone to sleep. He'd stayed in the living room, rooted to the couch, unable to think of anything except the words that he'd heard. Trying not to think of his reaction to them. Trying not to think of the things he'd done.

He knew that his mom thought the call was from him. And he knew that that wasn't true. That wasn't what had shocked him. He hadn't been shocked at all, in fact.

He'd just been angry. Someone had called his home, called his

mother, and scared her like that, when they knew that she had to be fragile. Frightened. And for some reason, that had made anger course through him suddenly, until he could feel his pulse in his forehead.

How dare they.

He'd stood up, resisting the urge to scream. Picked up one of the pillows on the musty, moldy sofa and hurled it across the room. Grabbed another, and done it again. Pillow after pillow, hurled across the room. They hit it with a soft, nearly inaudible *thump*, which just made him angrier. He'd gone to the kitchen, gotten a pair of scissors, grabbed the pillows and slashed at them. Tore them open. Ripped out the stuffing violently. None of it satisfied him. He wanted to do more – tear the covers off of his family's books, take a hammer to the window – but he sat down. Made himself breathe. Then he slowly, methodically, picked up the stuffing scattered around the room and stuffed it as best he could back into the pillow casings. Placed them back on the couch, mutilated as they were. Sat next to them, calm. Thinking of other things. Making himself stop thinking about that stupid prank caller.

Now, now that he was thinking about it again, he wasn't thinking about the prank caller. He wasn't thinking about his mom. He was just surprised, shocked even, at how angry he had been. Will was never angry. He'd never really had a reason to be. And when he did feel something grating on him or working him up, he could work himself down again. Remind himself that he was being unfair. And that this wouldn't really matter, not in the long run.

Whoever had called was probably just some idiot, high off of their mind. And if they weren't high, or drunk, then it was even clearer why there was no reason for him to get so mad. He didn't need to waste his thoughts on them. That's what Jonathan would have said, and that's what Will believed.

So why did the mere thought of that prank call make him want to punch something? Why did it make him want to throttle someone? Tear a hole through the universe, reach into the real world, and kill whoever dared hurt his mom that way with his bare hands?

He realized suddenly that he was standing up, hands gripping the

edge of the table so hard that it hurt. He took a deep breath, made himself take in his surroundings. He was in the middle of another world. There was a monster roaming the woods outside his house, and he might be alone. There was one other person who could have helped him, but now he might have scared him off, and he might be alone. Alone. So he needed to stop this, and focus.

He sat down.

And then some sort of monster reared up inside him, and he stood up, pushing his chair roughly out from under him, spun and slammed his hands against the kitchen wall. Pounded at it roughly, desperately with his fist. He didn't even know what he was angry at anymore, just something, just the world, just his family for not helping him, Dale for leaving him, the monster for chasing him here, and that other monster, the shadow one –

And then he hurled his fist against the wall again, and it didn't make contact. It just flew forward, *through* the wall, almost pulling him forward with it. He had to yank himself back, away from the wall, and hold his shaking hand to his chest. Stumble back, into the table, and hold his hand tight tight tight because *what had just happened?* He had done something, and he had felt something inside of him that he hadn't felt since two nights before. His hand had felt the air, and it was *different*. Somehow. He didn't know how, but his hand had reached into somewhere different. Somewhere that felt unmistakably like home.

He took a moment to slow his breathing, and then stepped forward. Reached his hand out again. Touched the wall.

Nothing.

Just a wall, solid under his fingers.

Just a –

What the –

Will just barely made it over to the sofa before the ground tilted dangerously and the world went black.

11. Chapter 10

A/N: I'm back! I've got nothing to say for myself except that I'm extremely sorry, that schoolwork picked up and that I let myself get out of the habit of writing. I'm still interested in the story and am going to try and start updating again, albeit not as regularly as before. I'd like to say that I'm extremely grateful for everyone's reviews, and for anyone who is still reading this. I love you all! Anyway, on with chapter 10:

As Dale made his way down the densely overgrown road, he found that he was starting to notice noises. Little things, like the occasional distant *hiss* in the trees, or the delicate *plop* of water falling from a leaf to the wet ground. He noticed more of the plants, too, than he had on that first night and day. Wet and glistening tendrils snaked across the asphalt, and little translucent seeds of some sort floated everywhere. He was going to be keeping his mouth shut from now on. Whatever was on those things, he didn't want it getting inside of him.

They were somewhere else. Both he and... some random *kid*—stuck somewhere else. Well, in the same place.

Well.

He didn't get it. He definitely wasn't about to get it. But understanding their predicament wasn't going to help them survive it. The only useful bit of information on that drawing, to him, was that no one was coming to help them. Which meant that they had to find their way out themselves.

Usually (at least, usually in all of the crappy comic books he'd read as a kid) the key to getting out was how they'd gotten in. The protagonist can't win until he harnesses the villain's powers and uses them against him. The hero can't get home until he finds the portal he'd traveled through. So how had he and the kid gotten here? They'd been fighting the monster when everything around them had changed. Both of them had been fighting. He and Will. He and Henry.

Out of habit, his brain glanced away from the thought of Henry. He

needed to be thinking about something, anything else. Was there something in the trees? Where was he going to go next— into the woods or down the road? To another house, or to the town? He stifled the impulse, though, and thought again about the monster. About how he'd gotten there.

What had happened? The monster attacked them. They'd fought for a moment, ran, he'd hit the monster with his shotgun—

Then he'd blacked out. When he came to, the world was like this—gray, empty, nothing more than a shell of the woods where he'd lived. The people were gone; he didn't care about the people, not really, but it surprised him, which not much did. Walking down these streets like he was doing now and not hearing the distant clamor of voices, the shrill bird calls, the rattle and groan of engines threw him off. He didn't miss them, but he had settled into a routine. He'd understood the world, and how it worked, and now he didn't.

As he picked his way along the rolling North Avenue, Dale forced his thoughts back to Henry, and what they'd been doing before the world had gone grey. Dale forced his thoughts back to Henry for the first time since he'd seen him last.

Dale couldn't describe Henry, not in a way that didn't make him sound like a pussy. But if he tried to, well...

The rest of the world, he didn't miss. It was monotonous and cruel, and it hadn't ever given him anything good. Henry, though, hadn't ever let him down. He'd had his back every time they'd gone hunting, every time he'd been too drunk to go home alone, every time he thought himself into a dark corner. It was like they read each other's minds, the way they worked together. If there was one person Dale could count on not to hurt him, it was Henry

and Henry was out there, somewhere, in the middle of the fucking woods
—

Dale's backpack strap snapped before he realized he'd been tugging at it. "*Jesus Christ,*" he growled, resisting the urge to kick something. It was times like this that he wished he could go back—right now, to before the monster, before that drunken fight in the bar, before his

dad, before he was fucking born, even, if he was being honest. He wanted to beat something up, *someone* up, but instead he settled for hurling a branch at one of the trees across the road. There was an unsatisfying *thwick* as it hit the bark and fell to the ground.

Dale took a deep breath. His breath was foggy from the cold. His hand was shaking, itching to throw a punch or *something, anything*, but he curled it into a fist.

He turned.

He was at the top of a shallow hill, and he could see a row of squat, orderly houses sitting in front of him. North Avenue cut its way through the center of them, and reached into the distance until the land dipped out of sight. Dale concentrated on that—on street's even, clean slice through the center of Hawkins.

He breathed in. Out.

He put his hands safely in his pockets and hiked on.

There wasn't anything edible in this goddamned place. Even the dusty, cobweb-covered cans were filled only with a thick, lumpy black sludge. The smell made him gag, but he pressed on. Thoughts of the creature kept worming their way into his head, and this was a distraction. He didn't want to—didn't *need* to think about it now.

That was one of the first lessons he'd learned as a kid. That whatever wasn't in front of you wasn't something you needed to worry about. Otherwise, you'd live your whole life cowering. It was how he survived years of bullying, and then several months of being a bully. It had been done, and it was over. It wasn't necessary for him to dwell on it, or feel guilty. It was how he survived his father.

He cursed, not quietly, as the jagged edge of the can lid cut into his thumb. He'd let himself get distracted, just like usual, and now there was this. He brushed the cans roughly off the counter and listened as they fell with a satisfying clatter to the tile floor. He knew what to do about his thumb. Knew what antiseptic he needed to apply, what bandages he needed to use and how to use them. It was just a small cut, though, and if anything like what had happened the night before

was happening again, he was pretty much dead already. He tore his sleeve and wrapped it around the wound.

Sloppy. Good enough.

He wondered for a moment what it might be like, now, if Henry was here with him. Easier, obviously. Henry was a world more skilled than the ten year old back at the house. As is, Henry was off somewhere in the woods, surviving on his own. Dale wanted to search for him, but there was a kid back at the house, and the fact was that Will needed Dale's help more than Dale needed company. Dale hated it, but he knew that when he could, he would find Henry, and they would be able to get out of this together. He laughed for a moment—Henry's hair would probably have gotten unruly over the past days; it'd been a while since he'd cut it. That would drive him crazy. Then Dale knocked a can against his bandage, making the cut sting momentarily, and he was brought back to the present. His best friend wasn't with him.

Dale turned to the haphazard pile of cans in front of him. They teetered on the grimy steel counters of the Benny's Burgers kitchen. Henry's favorite place, although he wasn't thinking about that when he came in. The place was unrecognizable now—cobwebs stretched across every corner, thick black roots or vines snaked across every surface, and the air was thick with the same floating spores as everywhere else. The sink was crisscrossed with black-encrusted cracks. Benny had always kept that sink clean; it was one of the weird habits of his. No one understood it, because the rest of the kitchen he always kept just in usable condition. Not spick and span like the kitchens in the city. Dale ignored the prick of emotion he felt at the sight of the grimy surface. Benny might've died on the spot if he'd seen everything in such bad condition.

Dale wondered for a moment where Benny was now. Was he cooking, yelling orders over the clamor of the kitchen on a weekend? Was it even the weekend anymore? Dale couldn't remember. He couldn't hear the faint chaos right now, the echoes and faraway cries of people in the real world, and he wasn't sure what to make of that. Benny's was always busy, so why was it silent?

He tore his thoughts back to the cans in front of him, and to making

his way through the whole pile. The only thing that made this any less disgusting was the fact that there weren't any flies. It was monotonous and boring, though—until the lights flickered. *Shit.*

Only now he noticed the chittering. He could tell that it was outside the building, nearby, even, and coming closer. The noise—a sort of lilting, alien bird call, although he knew that it wasn't from a bird—was a cold knife was tracing down his spine. Dale reached for one of the kitchen knives with shaking fingers. He didn't waste his thoughts on his shotgun, sitting behind in the kid's house, because regrets wouldn't help him escape the monster. He didn't think about his shotgun. Clutching the knife, he backed towards the rear door, away from the noise.

He heard a snuffling and the sound of the door clicking open. The lights were flashing furiously now, and it was a struggle to keep his eyes open and on the door of the kitchen.

His heartbeat picked up as, all the way across the room, the latch slid open. *Stupid*, he thought. *Weak*. He'd been reduced to a trembling idiot without a second person there to help him. His grip on the knife tightened, and he backed out quickly through the main dining area and onto the driveway. From the outside, the diner looked like something out of a horror movie—every surface black with grime, and the lights flickering on and off, on and off. And the constant, almost otherworldly chirping underlining everything.

He could hear the *stomp stomp stomp* footsteps of the creature getting heavier even as he walked backward, and it was only a few seconds more before he saw it enter the dining area. It struck him again how human it looked. It was only the ape-like crouche, the long limbs and the horrible, plant-like face that differentiated it, in the shadow, from any other person. It made Dale shiver.

It noticed him quickly, and reacted by turning its palms outward, unfurling its petals and hissing, loud enough for him to hear from outside the building. And that was that—he ran. From behind him, he heard a roar and a *bang*, presumably as the creature broke through the door. He picked up his pace.

He barely felt the burn in his legs, both because he'd done his fair

share of running and because his clear mind was occupied with the words *run run run*. He could, however, feel a raw scraping in his throat, and every breath made it worse. He turned down the street, and when he glanced back, the monster was much closer, and closing in fast.

Shit. Shit.

Okay.

Think.

He couldn't, though. All his focus was devoted to not slipping or tripping on the vine-covered, slick ground. He was used to relying on his instincts, though, which told him to swerve (sliding for one precarious moment before righting himself) around the next corner and hurry down that street.

His thoughts muddled further as the creature's footsteps became louder and louder. He needed to find somewhere to hide, and fast. Somewhere where he wouldn't be trapped. If only he'd lived in a big city, it would be easy, but in Hawkins—

The library. It wasn't so big in itself, but next to the squat buildings lining the road, it almost loomed. He put on a burst of speed that he wasn't aware he had in him, scrambled up the stairs (which looked almost like a forest floor, instead of the shiny marble from before), and pushed through the heavy stone doors just moments before the monster reached him. There was a crash as it slammed into the doors. They held.

Dale didn't turn from the entrance yet, though. He kept his gaze there, daring it to open, praying (praying—that was new) that it wouldn't, as he stepped slowly backwards. The monster roared once, and there was a second crash. Everything seemed almost muffled in the small, crowded space. There was a flash of a memory at the back of his mind; he used to come here after school, so that he could avoid going home. The feeling of relief, of temporary safety, was so strong that Dale had thought he'd loved the library. Even though he knew now that it was just an absence of hate, he felt a pang of nostalgia at the thought of ten-year-old him curling up by the bookshelves.

What the hell was going on with him? There was a human-like monster outside, that looked and sounded like some grotesque, mutated version of a singing flower, and he was getting sentimental. He was never like this before.

Besides the muffling, it was darker inside, which meant that when the third crash came, he almost didn't see the first crack appear.

Well, that showed how useful praying was. He turned and paused. Each bookcase was covered in a thick layer of dust and cobwebs and whatever that slimy black sludge was that seemed to be everywhere here. The ground was more thickly grown over than it was outside, and each step he had to take was deliberate. At the speed he'd half to go at, and the way the door was cracking behind him, he wouldn't be able to afford to double back. So which of the two doors should he take?

This place had been his safe haven as a kid. How had he forgotten his way around it now?

There was an awful roar from outside, and a crash that shook the ground under Dale's feet, as the room suddenly lit up. Dale could see the silhouette of the monster's shadow against the wall in front of him, and his heart sped up. He easily cut off his own train of thought and turned to the left, ELEPHANT through the doorway there. It was even darker here, and the only light, thick and dim from clouds, was made dimmer by the filter of the grimey windows. There was a door on the other end of the room, and Dale just had to get through the maze of—

Shit.

Shit.

He shut his eyes, forced down the wave of panic that was rising inside him, and looked back down at the pile of not-books at his right.

Under the cobwebs, there was a boy. His skin was grey and mottled in the places that it was still intact. His face was godawful; his eyes, which looked strange and soulless, were wide, and his mouth formed

a round, stiff O. His hair was curly and blonde and covered in grit. He was older than the kid back at the house—thank god, because Dale didn't know if he could handle being alone out here, even though *being alone* had been one of his dreams back at home. But god... even the knowledge that the body there wasn't anyone he knew did nothing to stem the rising nausea. The head was the only thing visible, and he didn't imagine what was under the mess of cobwebs and vines.

The slow, heavy footsteps of the monster outside seemed like background noise, now, unimportant in the face of this new horror. Dale had seen injuries, and he'd killed, but those were only animals. He'd never seen a dead *person* before. This was his first. And it already wasn't his last. Looking around, he finally noticed that the other piles weren't books either. All people—*jesus*, actual people, with families and lives and little quirks and he didn't know why he was so emotional about it but he *was*—in various states of decay. All dead, dead, dead.

Dale stood, breathing shallowly, in a dimly lit room, everything aged from years that never happened, a million miles from his house and yet just a few streets away, feeling fatigued beyond anything he'd ever experienced. He needed to find a way out. Out of this room, out of this building, out of this world, and back into his own. He missed it. God, he'd hated his life so much, but now he missed it.

And that was when he saw the lock of hair (longer than it'd been just two days back) curling over a grey face, peeking out from under a vine across the room.

12. Chapter 11

Hey, kid!

It was a man's voice. Not Jonathan—Jonathan wouldn't call him *kid*. His dad? Will felt a rush of relief, although he didn't know why.

Kid!

He was shaking—what was going on? An earthquake? But it couldn't be an earthquake, because something was gripping his shoulders. Will got a sudden vision of the chittering monster hunching over him, shaking him with its strong and spindly hands. He watched as it began to twist, grow, morph into something larger that chilled him to the bone. It lifted its horned head and bent its many spider-like legs to lean closer to Will's face—

"Hey, Will! Wake up!"

Will sprang up, ready to fight, heart hammering, hands up. He almost collided with Dale, who was standing over him. "What—what's going on?" He scrambled back. "What—" Adrenaline pumped through him, sending his nerves haywire, jangling the temperature, and it needed somewhere to go, and he was feeling trapped under Dale and the shadow monster was bowing over him and the sky was crackling and he was trying to push Dale off but he wasn't strong enough—

"Will!" Dale took his hands off Will's shoulders but didn't move away. "Calm down, kid." He puts a hand to his head, as if to stave off a migraine. "Jesus." The last word is under his breath. Will hears it.

"I—I'm sorry," Will says, fighting to slow his breathing, keep it level. His thoughts are battling for dominance, in a fight that he can't understand at all. His mom's panicked voice, and Jonathan, who sounded just as terrified, trying to calm her down. The hulking monster made of storm clouds, rolling away across the miniscule town. The prank caller. Will felt a surge of anger, and he clenched his jaw and fist, pushing it down.

The wall. Bending under his fingers, like it wasn't there at all. He

looked past Dale's conflicted face, at the mottled and moldy wallpaper lining the back of the kitchen. Solid. Whole. What had happened? Maybe Dale would know. Maybe Dale could tell him what to do. He opened his mouth—

"You're hungry, kid, right? That's why you fainted." Something in Dale's face was pleading. Pleading for what, Will didn't know, but it made Will nod.

"Yeah. Hungry."

"Well, there's no food in this fucking town. That's not the point, though, I found something." He grinned, and there was something in his face. It wasn't a spark. There was something there that made the tired lines of his expression look ready. Happy. *Happy*. Will sat up. Did Dale know what to do? Did he know how to save them?

"You did?" Will felt a smile pulling at his mouth, and hope flickered in him.

"I know where that bastard monster's hiding, and I know how we can find him."

It hadn't been what Will was expecting, but Dale was so clearly ELEPHANT that Will couldn't help but have a little bit of hit rub off. "Where? How—how did you find it?"

"It found me while I was digging through cans in Benny's diner—I think it can smell or sense us, by the way, because it felt like it was *hunting* for me, but anyway—I was digging through all the shit in the larder, trying to find something that we can eat, when the monster came through the door. It chased me out, and I think it chased me to its hideout. It must have been by accident, but it did. It's in the public library. That's where it keeps the—" Here something flashed over his face; a sudden shadow came and went almost too fast for Will to see. He paused. "That's where it keeps the bodies."

So there are other people here, Will thought, and then, *Were*. The emotion showed on his face, and Dale said "Yeah." He opened his mouth as if to saying something else, but seemed to change his mind, and simply said "yeah" again, with a sigh.

It took only a moment for Dale to shake it off. "They're... gone, though, now. And we can use this. We'll find a way to trap the bastard, and if we can do this right, we can kill it so that we can find our way out of this goddamn place in peace."

"We want to—to kill it?" Will's voice shook on that sentence. He remembered his Dad's occasional hunting trips. Will had gone too, once, but had frozen when he saw the deer stepping into the clearing. It looked so graceful, so innocent. Like a magical creature. His dad had shot it on sight.

Will had cried for hours.

Something in Dale's expression became fiercer. "That thing took us here, Will." Will remembered reaching into himself, pulling himself through a doorway, but he didn't argue. "It killed—it's dangerous, and it needs to die."

"Okay," Will said softly.

"We need to figure out how to hurt it."

The light had left the air several hours later.

They'd spent the last several hours searching the house top to bottom for weapons. They'd checked the shed (the shotgun was still there, lying on the ground where Will had dropped it two nights before), searched the kitchen (Joyce hadn't cooked much, but there was an array of dusty and slime-coated kitchen knives in the drawer), and even taken down some of the Christmas lights from the hallway in order to see how sharp they were when broken (enough to cut). They'd also combed through three bedrooms, checked all furniture to see if it was strong enough to survive hitting anything, and in the process disassembled all four chairs on the front porch. Nothing. Nothing other than a small flashlight which shone dimly, if erratically.

Will was holding that flashlight out now as he crept through the house. Dale was searching their neighbor's houses while Will stayed behind, and Will couldn't help but feel a thrum of fear. The nearest house was a five minute bike ride, and almost a fifteen minute walk.

Here, everything was so *still*, and in the darkness he felt as if the monster could be lurking anywhere. He couldn't keep still, so he was walking around the house, taking inventory like he'd done on the first night.

He was in his own house. That much he was still sure of. But with every passing hour he saw more changes, more eerie misplacements and errors that seemed to have been made. Like someone had traced his house over, but the paper had been too thick. But their hand had slipped.

It didn't make sense. The long-dead christmas lights criss-crossing the ceilings and walls. The faded, peeling letters of the alphabet above the living room sofa. The circle of lamps around the foot of his bed. The movement of random things—the chair pushed across the sitting room, for example. Will walked over to it now.

Why were these things different? Had the people that the monster had killed been in his room before? Had they put the lights, the letters, up for a reason? Or was he right that this house was just a poor copy of his own? Will put a hand on the back of the chair. It was facing the phone the always hung on the wall, but that was another mistake—the phone was a slightly different shape than the one he remembered, a slightly different color. The phone hung by its cord a few feet below the machine.

Will felt a shock of emotion. Sadness—that his mother and Jonathan were so close, and yet utterly unreachable. And fear—of the monster in Hawkins, and of the possibility that he himself was becoming a monster. The possibility that, even if he did get home, he wouldn't be able to just be Will again. Will looked down at his hand, thin and pale in the flickering torch light. He flexed his fingers. What was it that had happened earlier, before he'd blacked out?

Because he needed something to do, he crossed the floor to the phone, and reached to put it in its place. But as he placed it—

Hello?

Was that...

Hello? Who is this?

...his mom's voice?

Someone had called his mom, at the exact moment that Will had touched the phone.

Will?

His first thought was that it was the prank caller, again. That they were staying silent on the line just to freak his mom out.

Will—it's me. Talk to me.

But then he felt a flicker of hope.

I'm here.

His hand was still on the phone. Was there really a connection between this phone and the same one in the real living room? Impossible.

Just—just tell me where you are—I can hear you.

He felt light and fragile as a feather.

"Mom?" Will said. Will heard a strangled gasp.

Will—yes it's me

It was her.

it's me

His fingers felt weak. He could talk to his mom. His mom could talk to him.

where are you

What was he supposed to say? There were so many words.

just talk to me

Will's hands slipped, and the phone fell. As he fumbled to catch it, to bring it back up to his face, he heard his mom yell out. "Mom?" He cried, terrified without quite being sure why. "Mom?"

There was no answer.

Will dropped the telephone, backed into the hall, held shaking hands to his mouth. His mom—his actual mom, who he would do anything to have here now—had been there. She'd been right *there*, talking to him. He'd dropped the phone. And now she was gone. Will pulled at his hair, feeling tears crawl up his throat. They burst out jaggedly. "Mom," he said, too quiet for anyone but himself. But it didn't matter, because she'd gone. He'd messed it up. He stumbled against the wall to his left, and just let himself stay there for a moment.

He was so tired.

Jonathan?

Her voice was closer now, like she was coming down the hall after him. Jonathan must be home, in his room.

Jonathan?

Will stumbled down the hall. He assumed she was behind him, or far, far away from him, or—

He was so tired.

Will looked into his dark, empty room, or into this badly copied version of it, and felt all the sadness, all the fear, all the hopelessness in the world crash into him like a tidal wave. It would have knocked him over if he hadn't caught himself on the table. The phantom sun was gone. Dale had left the house. His mom, Jonathan—even his dad, who he'd loved even when he wasn't loved back—were completely gone. Completely out of reach. Will felt more alone, more helpless, than ever before. He gasped a little, and then let himself go, let the tears flow down his face. Let himself sob.

He was pathetic, but he couldn't help himself. Everything about this place seemed designed to taunt him, to torture him. His family's voices were hanging in the air, but they couldn't hear his. His whole

house—his *home*—was there, surrounding him, but it was wrong. All of it was wrong.

His radio. That radio held so many memories. Dance parties in his room with Jonathan. Sitting around on the floor with Mike and Lucas to play board games while listening to the Clash. Reading comic books with Dustin to Queen. He loved that radio. And now it was just a tear-streaked, blurry relic.

Will reached out to lay a hand on it.

There was a sudden blast of noise, and Will jumped. He'd felt as if his whole body had been lit up with static. A cold sort of electricity. He recognized it from somewhere. *What was that?* Shaking, he turned to look behind him.